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Preview: the Soviet experts and SALT

As the debate on SALT II gets underway, the American public will be treated to a confusing phenomenon. There will be experts on Soviet affairs—scholars, former diplomats, retired generals and admirals, and ex-intelligence officers—who will differ sharply with each other. At one extreme will be a group who believes the Soviets are evil men dedicated to the destruction or enslavement of the United States and its allies. At the other extreme will be those who believe the Soviets are fearful of the United States and dedicated to the peaceful development of their country. And there will be various gradations of views in between the extremes. Why will so many so-called experts differ so sharply?

One reason is that the questions we ask of ourselves and of our Soviet experts cannot be easily answered. For example, "What kind of people are they really, and what do they want?" is a debatable question. But the Soviets must also ask the same questions about us.

What kind of people are we, when we elect as president a man who made a political career out of anti-communism and then initiated a policy of détente?

What kind of people are we, when we then reelect him with a large majority and drive him from office less than two years later?

What kind of people are we when we substitute a Columbia University professor born in Poland for a Harvard professor born in Germany and with the substitution get a national security advisor to the president who looks as if he is undermining the policy of his predecessor?

What kind of people are we when many conservatives seek to relax tensions with Russia and many liberals seek to heighten them?

Paradoxes abound in American policy and behavior as well as in Soviet policy and behavior. These paradoxes are not easy to resolve. Much depends upon history, what evidence, what individuals, what theories and explanations one chooses to take into account.

One reason the experts differ is because their experiences have been different and because they have formed hypotheses to which they have become emotionally and intellectually attached. It will be easy to observe these advocates and then characterize them irresponsibly with such epithets as "old time liberal" or "old Cold Warrior." But most will be honorable men who believe that they have studied the subject and considered the issues carefully.

Are there any guidelines to help the public and its elected representatives judge what they are being told? Probably none that are definitive. But the cause is not hopeless. Here are a few thoughts that might help.

- Some experts will be retired military officers of high rank who have given this nation many years of dedicated service. They are men who have had terrible responsibilities; they have been charged with being prepared to deliver the most terrifying weapons in human history upon the people of another nation. They have been obliged to think of the Soviet Union as the potential enemy; it was easier to do this if they looked upon the Soviets as evil men aiming to destroy us one way or another. Not all military leaders, of course, have followed this avenue toward personal self-respect. But some did and—in retirement—have adhered to the same prescription.

- Some will be former government officials whose formative years, both as students and officials, were during the excesses and atrocities of the Stalinist period. They were right then to have thought of that Soviet leader as an evil man. But there has also been a political revolution of major proportions in the Soviet Union since Stalin's death, which has altered many aspects of Soviet ideology and behavior. Not all of those whose ideas were formed during the Stalinist period have comprehended the things important to distinguish those who have from those who have not.

- Many of the "experts" who will testify will be specialists in the mathematics of destruction, a major industry in this country and a major preoccupation of many Pentagon officials. The country will be bargained with statistical data on throw-weights, CEPs, kill probabilities, and much more. The impact of all this will be to suggest that the decision regarding SALT should be made on the basis of complex statistical calculations which only the "expert" can understand. What will get lost or obfuscated will be the simple fact that both sides already have more than enough nuclear weapons to kill each other off anyway. It will be important not to let the statisticians get control of the debate.

- Patriotism and anti-communism—not the same thing—will get a big play among self-proclaimed experts who write newspaper editorials and make senatorial speeches for the record. It ought to be made clear at the outset what will be undeniably true, namely, that all sides on the debate will be patriots and none desirous of replicating the Soviet political system here or elsewhere. The issue again will be quite simple: will the SALT agreement help or hurt the stabilization of mutual deterrence? It will not be a question of love of country or love of Russia; it will be a question of what happens in the arms race if we do not have SALT.

- There will be other so-called experts who will try to link arms control with the health of détente. They will rehearse Soviet behavior over the past few years and suggest that arms control agreements should not be ratified because détente has "failed," and so forth. But arms control and détente are not dependent one upon the other; arms control has justifications of its own. The sole question should be whether SALT II can justify itself, not whether it is justified by détente.

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